

We'll Always Have Allusions:  
The Cultural Function of Allusions

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## INTRODUCTION

“Maybe our favorite quotations say more about us than the stories and people we’re quoting.”

—John Green

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single work in possession of a good allusion must be in want of a culturally educated audience. An allusion is a direct or “indirect reference to a person, event, statement, or theme found in literature, the other arts, history, mythology, religion, or popular culture” (*Bedford Glossary* 9). They can serve the basic function of paying homage to another text or building upon a work by imitating, mocking, or furthering a concept from that text. Allusions can stem from a recent and contemporary work or they can revive a text from the distant past. Occasionally allusions are used simply to demonstrate one’s education, while at other times, they are used for humor or criticism. These distinctions, however, greatly simplify the purpose of allusions, as allusions also have a significant cultural purpose. As they build connections between texts and people, allusions also build a culture in which those texts and people can position themselves.

Most of the currently available analyses of allusion are very specific. They concern a particular author, theme, or body of work. When analyzing literature, scholars consider the creator’s goal in selecting the precise allusions. The analysis attempts to discern what benefit the work gains from the allusions; in other words, what connections are formed through the allusions and why they are desirable as a set. The article, “Echoes of the Ancestors: Literary Reverberations in Yeats’s ‘The Second Coming,’” for example, examines how Yeats’ poem uses allusions from many different religions and cultures in order to create a timeless effect in his poetry, so that his message is not limited to his contemporary Christian sphere (Vannini 323).

Popular culture is occasionally examined in this way, as seen with articles that group and describe all of the allusions to classic movies in the Oscar-winning film, *La La Land*, in order to demonstrate how the film is honoring them and continuing a specific musical film tradition (Harris). In other occasions, the examination serves more to simply uncover all of the allusions found in the work. This is why allusions in popular culture are often called “Easter eggs” or “hidden references,” even when they are fairly clear. The allusions are usually then appreciated individually, rather than as a set. The many YouTube videos with montage lists of all the references in Disney animated movies, for example, focus on helping the movies’ audiences understand each reference itself, rather than focusing on the sum of the allusions that have been brought together. In this discussion of allusions, however, they will be discussed as a genre that works across texts, rather than simply within one specific body of work.

“My name is Darth Vader. I am an extraterrestrial from the planet Vulcan!” –Marty McFly,  
*Back to the Future*

Generally, one of three things occurs when a reference is made: the original context is lost and treated as irrelevant, the original context is purposely changed or misinterpreted, or the original context is kept and bleeds into the new work. When Marty McFly mixes *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, for example, audience members may cringe, but his point (that he is an alien to be feared) remains clear. In other instances, the way that the context is edited not only changes the literal meaning of the reference but also how the allusion works within the text, especially if the context editing is deliberate.

Gifs, or reaction gifs in particular, for example, are ways to bring television and other media into the context of everyday conversations. Gifs, whether pronounced with a soft or a hard

g, are something in between photos and videos, and they allow people to take a digital moment and place it within a real life context. In some ways, they resemble the pictures in *Harry Potter* as they silently loop the same several second clip over and over, often with captions. They are used to react and reply to a comment or post in a digital text-based conversation, often when one wishes to express a feeling. There are hundreds of gifs that presumably represent the same feeling but with subtle differences.

By taking the clips out of their original context, the person using them can completely transform the meaning. Without sound, character, and situational context, a sarcastic moment can be used genuinely and vice versa. A gif of actor Nathan Fillion, for example, in which he opens his mouth to speak and closes it several times before finally covering his mouth with his hand can, depending on its new context, be used to express hesitation, speechlessness, frustration, or conflicted feelings. The facial expressions in the gif can somehow be both more specific and vaguer than would come across in text, as dictated by the conversational context in which it is placed. This is possible whether or not one knows the actor's name, the show the clip is from, or the scene.

If the user and receiver of the gif both know the original context, they may choose to keep the original context or change it anyway. A gif of Chris Pratt as Andy Dwyer from *Parks and Recreation* throwing rose petals, for example, can be used to indicate goofy romance as it is in the show, but since the petals really just look like confetti, it is often simply used for general celebration or excitement. Alternatively, the use of the gif can be different when both parties know the original context because there is less interpretation of the quote and visuals of the gif. Instead, the gif becomes a representation of the scene or character from which it is taken. Gifs of Ross Gellar from *Friends* saying, "I'm fine," do not express how untrue the statement is as

clearly as when he expresses it through his voice in the show. Someone who has never seen it may use or interpret the gif to genuinely declare feeling “fine.” People who know the scene, however, would be aware that the statement is less than accurate.

Understanding allusions can therefore come on multiple levels as the allusion spreads to different contexts. One must understand how the allusion is used in the current work, obviously, in order to interact with it properly, but that does not automatically mean that the person understands the original context. This can be because the context has changed or because the person does not even realize that the moment is a derivative. This can be seen when people take out of context the Robert Frost quote, “I took the [road] less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference” from the poem, “The Road Not Taken.” They often use it to mean that the unknown or unappealing can be better than what is popular. In the poem, however, that is not the case. Frost actually notes that both roads are “really about the same.” Recognizing and referencing this poem, therefore, offers someone a certain amount of cultural capital, but only a person who is truly culturally educated would follow and be able to utilize both the original and new contexts.

What is interesting here, and important to note going forward, is that a measure of cultural signifiers are retained even when the allusion is altered. Even when the connection created by the allusion is only a surface-level connection, it can still do important cultural work for the text. Altered allusions, therefore, are not excluded from this discussion, so long as their meaning within the new text is properly understood.

“We live in a web of ideas, a fabric of our own making.” –Joseph Chilton Pearce

The way that audiences view allusions is more complicated than simply whether or not

they understand them, as discussed in the theory of intertextuality. The theory of intertextuality is the idea that a text alone is not whole and that it functions within an open system (Worton 1).

Intertextuality allows allusions to transcend individual works and ties the works to both the network of culture and the audience itself. The allusions used within a work create the culture in which the reader and work should surround themselves. A high fantasy work, for example, may allude to Classic mythical beasts and Arthurian expectations of knighthood in order to build its world. A comedy about geniuses may contain many more allusions to nerd culture than other genres. A satire, meanwhile, might allude to all aspects of contemporary culture in order to ground itself and properly mock and criticize its surroundings. Allusions help place the work and audience in a particular place in the intertextual matrix—essentially the matrix in which cultural media is stored—helping the creator tell the audience exactly what to expect. The allusion itself is actually a dialogue between reader and author; the reader therefore is also a point in the matrix of allusion, not just the work with the allusion and the work from which it was borrowed. Once audience members engage with the work, they can then extend the network by alluding to it themselves in everyday life or even in new texts.

According to the literary theory of intertextuality, everything is an allusion. This assumption applies to a range of subjects in literature, spanning from direct quotes and adaptations to ubiquitous nouns, like blood. (Is it a reference to medicine? Jesus? Hamlet? South Park? Nothing?) Everything is a reference, whether intended or not, because everything that the writer has read or experienced previously works together and builds on itself to create this new product. There are even references that may mean something to the reader, from his or her own experience, that mean nothing to the writer.

Joseph Pucci's book *The All Knowing-Reader*, in contrast, describes allusions as only



hypothetical unless the reader activates them. Although they may be always physically in the text, they only exist for some readers. While accidental allusions do work for the individual, only allusions understood correctly by the general culturally educated audience do cultural work. Although sometimes the creator's intention and the audience's understanding of the allusion do not match up, the proverbial magic occurs when they do. That magic is the reason allusions are used so commonly.

While these methods of analysis play an essential role in analyzing allusions, neither alone allows for a full explanation of allusions as a literary device. Using allusions, after all, is somewhat of a risk. The author must hope that the audience cares enough to seek them out. The problem with allusions is that they are intimately tied to audience; the audience must understand the allusion in order for it to function. If the audience does not catch and activate the reference, it is useless. If they notice but do not understand it, the allusion is similarly rendered pointless. Allusions must therefore be carefully chosen so that they speak to their audience's knowledge. In order to prevent this problem from materializing then, allusions usually involve culturally relevant or significant works. In the words of *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, allusions typically concern "a body of information that the author presumes the reader will know." This often leads allusions to be representative of the culture in which they reside. All readers, however, do not have the same cultural knowledge, which means that allusions can regularly fall flat. So why would a writer take the risk of referencing something that the audience would not understand? Why remind audiences of other works that are still competing with the writer's work for attention in the public cultural consciousness? Why continue to bring back works from civilizations long gone?

The answer is that allusions function as more than just funny in-jokes or

acknowledgments of other works; they work as cultural signifiers that writers, works, and audience members can trade in both literature and popular culture. The two main ways that allusion functions are as cultural capital and as cultural currency. Cultural capital involves what one could consider vertical trading, within a hierarchy of culture. This term is taken from Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction*, which concerns raising class status through one's use of culture. In Chapter One, this discussion will be redirected away from shifting economic class and towards classifications of literature. A "low" ranked text, for example, might allude to a highly respected text, in order to gain its status. Cultural currency, in contrast, involves horizontal trading, building connections and conversations across and between texts. This is related to what Umberto Eco calls "Cult Culture," in reference to a culture where everyone is aware of allusions and the way that they show how texts stem from other texts. In chapter two, Eco's view of allusions will be expanded upon in a discussion that will examine not only how creators and texts speak to each other through allusions, but also how audience members do so. While capital arranges hierarchy, currency builds community. Although they work in different directions, the two often work together. It all depends on how the creator and the audience want to position their text within the web of intertextuality. Through allusions, texts can bring themselves closer to other choice texts or ideas, shifting their initial relationship with culture and the intertextual network.

"Let me explain. No, there is too much. Let me sum up." –Inigo Montoya, *The Princess Bride*

The Marvel character Steve Rogers, as represented in the movie franchise, provides a perfect case study for allusion's significance as a cultural act. Steve Rogers, also known as the superhero Captain America, is often quoted online saying, "I understood that reference"

(*Avengers*). That sentence, though seemingly ordinary and probably said by many people multiple times over the course of their lifetimes, has a very specific meaning and context to certain fans and viewers of the Marvel Cinematic movie franchise. Rogers, somewhat displaced in time after being unconscious for over fifty years, says the line in the movie, *The Avengers*, after finally understanding a pop culture reference made by another character. The reference is an allusion to the flying monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz* and a somewhat unexciting comparison to the other characters, but it also happens to be one of the few allusions that is taken from his previous lifetime. Often online, when people post a screenshot or gif of Rogers saying the line, it is in a similar circumstance of proud surprise. In other situations, however, (going back to the effects of context) they use it to show that they are part of a special group or community that understands a reference or joke that other viewers or readers may not understand. There is also an altered version of the post that says, “When someone says ‘I understood that reference,’ and I’m like...” above the shot of Rogers that is captioned “I understood *that* reference.” According to the website Know Your Meme, the first gif of the movie quote was posted online on December 18, 2012 and that particular gif received over ten million views in around two years (“I Understood”). The fact that this momentary exchange is so often used demonstrates that the act of understanding allusions itself allows one to gain something significant; by understanding, the person the ability to truly interact with the text, its audience, its culture, and any other text connected to them.

When someone says "I understood that reference", and I'm like...



This difficulty in understanding references has become so connected with the character of

Captain America that, in a different Marvel movie, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, Rogers is so frustrated by his lack of understanding of pop culture references that he keeps a notebook with a list that he adds to whenever other characters allude to or recommend something that he does not recognize. This list is a mix of music to check out and socio-political movements to look into, which points to the importance of allusion in culture outside of entertainment. Rogers does not write them down only to be entertained, but also to be educated and obtain the capital and currency that they hold. They are a part of the everyday life of the culture in which he now finds himself, and therefore, understanding the allusions allows him to better understand the world and people around him. Allusions are so casually made by the people around him, traded as currency with the automatic assumption that everyone listening would understand, but Rogers' status as a man out of his own time makes them stop, acknowledge, and label the allusion, as he does in the "I understood that reference" moment (*Avengers*).

There is a point in the movie *The Winter Soldier*, as Rogers adds a new item to his list, in which the viewer gets a glance at what is written in the notebook. This moment is even more telling about the importance of allusion in culture building. The audience is not only made aware of the fact that he is collecting allusions to look into, but is also able to learn exactly what he has listed (and can potentially learn more about the references themselves if they so desire). The list items are, of course, things and events that Rogers specifically is likely to care about, due to his personality and characterization: "I Love Lucy (television); Moon Landing; Berlin Wall (Up + Down); Steve Jobs (Apple); Disco; Thai Food; Star Wars/Trek; Nirvana (Band); Rocky (Rocky II?); Troubleman (Soundtrack)" (*Captain America*). All the events mentioned took place while Rogers was in the coma and appeal to his presumed tastes. They do not, therefore, define the culture around him, but they do provide a general overview. Because they are items that people

would causally mention, household names and terms that people are expected to know, they can characterize a culture.

The items shown on Rogers' list are specifically chosen as markers of cultural importance—and the items are edited, changed based on the country where the movie is shown. The list above is from the North American version of the movie. The last five items are the same in every edition (possibly for film editing reasons) but the first several differ from nation to nation. The Russian version, for example, lists “Disco” along with new entries like “Soviet Union Dissolution-1991; Moscow doesn’t believe in tears” whereas the United Kingdom version does not have “Disco,” but does say “TV show-Sherlock; Moon Landing; The Beatles; World Cup Final (1966); Sean Connery” (*Captain America*). The differences between the allusions on the lists speak volumes about the culture in each country—or at least what the writers thought about the culture in each country. Some items are specifically tailored to the history of the viewer’s country, like how Korea’s list has “2002 World Cup,” rather than the United Kingdom’s 1966 date (*Captain America*). Several versions also list influential people from the country, often from the fields of politics, innovation, or the arts. This editing ensures that in each country, the list remains a catalogue of commonly understood and referenced pieces of culture.

The items that were internationally relevant or important, such as the moon landing, but are only on a couple of the lists are also telling. The Beatles, for example, are only on the United Kingdom list, though they were culturally significant in the United States as well. This highlights the idea that their status in their home nation is even more prominent than in the Americas. Similarly surprising, the Berlin Wall is only on the lists for Italy, Germany, and North America, even though Britain and France were also intimately tied to the historic issues that occurred there. The list, which is expanded as Rogers hears references and allusions, implies that these are

the events and people that the contemporary characters (and audience members in that nation) still discuss. These are the allusions that make up a culture. According to the *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* writers, contemporary Americans are more likely to bring up Thai food than The Beatles.

The writers of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* did not need to include varying lists in different movie versions for plot purposes—in fact, in some ways it makes less sense for Rogers’ list to differ by country. He is, after all, Captain America, a presumed paradigm of American virtues and ideals, and therefore would only really be told about and interested in the culture that he missed in the United States. It is, in fact, unlikely that he would hear casual references to “Neri Vela (1<sup>st</sup> Mexican astronaut)” or “Ji Sung-Park” were he not in South America or South Korea, respectively (*Captain America*). The differing lists, then, must be for the audiences watching the movie, rather than for Rogers. They provide a cultural connection into the movie for the audience that otherwise may not have a connection to the American culture and ideals so often espoused by the character and his franchise, and they continue to emphasize the importance of recognizing allusions by converting the references to ones that each audience will understand.

This list shift is important because it demonstrates the importance of cultural capital and currency. The items on the list are more than interesting tidbits of information, they are things that people need to know in order to be cultured members of society. The list is made up of things that every member of the audience should know about, just from living as a culturally aware citizen. If any adult (because some of these allusions are generational cultural signifiers and younger viewers may not yet have been exposed to all of it, similarly to the way Rogers has not) mentioned to a friend that they did not know anything about *I Love Lucy* or Steve Jobs, the

friend's reaction would probably be to feel shock and the desire to educate the uninformed citizen. By demonstrating knowledge of and access to the cultural staples, a person gains greater understanding of the cultural moment and of the intertextual network in which all media lies. The intertextual network is the way that all works, whether literature or media, high art or popular culture, are connected, and it means that if a reader understands one work, that will help him or her understand and better appreciate countless other works. Once a person is educated and integrated into the cultural matrix, that person can participate, trading allusions, arranging cultural capital and communicating cultural currency.

## CHAPTER ONE: Cultural Capital

“[A] quotation is a handy thing to have about, saving one the trouble of thinking for oneself, always a laborious business.” –A.A. Milne, *If I May*

Cultural capital is a knowledge of culture that allows for better opportunities or experiences. Pierre Bourdieu, in his work *Distinction*, coins the term in order to discuss the phenomenon where people raise their class status for economic gain. When allusions serve as cultural capital, the focus is less on gaining economic wealth, however. They allow a work or character within a work to gain cultural standing, arranging the work in the hierarchy of cultural texts. An example of this can be seen in the television show, *Gilmore Girls*. The allusions made by the three Gilmore women, Emily, Lorelai, and Rory, allow them to be categorized and placed in a social hierarchy. In season one, for example, while the characters are still being established, the type of allusions that each makes is already distinctive. Emily begins dinner by discussing “the Kennedy clan” and describing her disappointment with Lorelai and Rory for not discussing more worldly matters, saying “Camelot is truly dead” (Sherman-Palladino “The Third Lorelai”). She also makes a biblical reference. Lorelai, in contrast, makes much less sophisticated and more pop culture related references. She jokes about Madonna (punning about the singer and the mother of God), mocks Miss Manners, jokes about David Mamot (writer of “Sexual Perversity in Chicago”), and imitates Ricky from *I Love Lucy* (Sherman-Palladino “The Third Lorelai”). Rory, meanwhile, tends to fit between the two adults in the hierarchy of cultural capital. She makes both higher brow allusions—such as to Nietzsche and Henry VIII—and pop culture allusions—such as to *Casablanca*, the Marx Brothers, and stewardess Barbie (Sherman-Palladino “The Third Lorelai”). Although they are each very culturally educated, their respective allusions



delineate their status within the family and society. The allusions correspond to their economic status (for the two adult characters), but the women use them not for economic gain and instead for social status within their family and their communities.

When allusions function as a type of cultural capital, many of the pre-established connotations from the original text and much of the work that the original text accomplishes travel to the new text that is borrowing the reference. Although A.A. Milne refers to using quotations as a shortcut for the writer's thought process in the above quote, it is also a shortcut for the reader's understanding of the text. By using well-known allusions in texts, writers can elevate their texts nearer to another already respected and established text. This can occur on several levels, as allusions can be utilized to elevate either the text as a whole or a single specific aspect of the text. By incorporating references to other respected works, a text can borrow some of the positive reputation of those older texts while also honoring the culturally relevant texts that came before it.

Elevation within the hierarchy of the intertextual matrix therefore works in several ways. Often it occurs because the use of the allusion causes the new text or something in the new text to be compared to the older more established text. This is similar to the phenomenon in book, movie, or music reviews where the reviewer positively compares a new work to a mixture of several highly regarded works of which it is derivative. Alternatively, a work can be elevated simply by acknowledging its awareness of other culturally respected works. This can be accomplished through self-aware mimicry, like a well-executed star-crossed lovers' story, or through a blatant direct reference, like a speech that contains a quote from *Hamlet* or a political leader. All of these tactics ultimately allow the work that contains the allusion to build upon a current store of cultural capital in order to create something new that is culturally relevant from

the start.

“Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better.” –T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*

The Broadway show *Something Rotten!*, a musical by Wayne and Karey Kirkpatrick about the men who write “the first musical,” demonstrates the limits and possibilities of working with allusions as cultural capital. Interestingly, by using allusions to other musicals, the Broadway show *Something Rotten!* is elevated, but the show within it does not quite reach the same heights. *Something Rotten!* takes place in Shakespeare’s time (he is even a character) and the main character, Nick Bottom, hires a soothsayer, Nostradamus, to look into the future and tell him the next big trend in stage shows. Nick wants to write Shakespeare’s biggest play before Shakespeare himself can, while also incorporating this predicted musical trend in order to be a more successful and financially stable playwright. This leads to many incorrect interpretations of and references to “future” (in the plot’s timeline) Shakespeare works, in addition to allusions to “already written” Shakespeare works and “future” Broadway musicals. While Nick is attempting to imitate (and is possibly defacing) Broadway numbers, the Kirkpatrick brothers are stealing and synthesizing them into something new and, if not better, still great.

The musical as a whole uses allusions uniquely because the audience and, to an extent, the soothsayer understand them but the other characters do not. Even Nostradamus’ understanding is dubious, considering his character description found in the *Something Rotten! Educational Guide*: “THOMAS NOSTRADAMUS is Nostradamus’ nephew and not quite as talented or adept at telling the future like his uncle. In fact, he gets Nick’s premonition for the greatest play of all time very, very wrong” (5). Nick Bottom, meanwhile, is not aware that he is

in a musical even as he sings along. He certainly does not understand the jokes and references that the soothsayer is making, such as when Nostradamus calls Nick's brother's girlfriend, who is causing arguments between the brothers, "Yoko" (*Something Rotten!* 72). He is being taught about some of the most culturally significant musicals of the future—*Avenue Q*, *Annie*, *Chicago*, *Rent*, *Les Misérables*, *Evita*, *The Music Man*, *A Chorus Line*, and more—so that he can create the first musical based off of them. It is a strange backwards way to honor these works and use them to give Nick's musical credibility.

Because of this backwards system, Nick Bottom cannot use allusions the way that most people do. His teacher is unreliable, with only flashes and incorrect interpretations of the future. Nostradamus, for example, calls Shakespeare's greatest work "*Omelette*" instead of "*Hamlet*" (*Something Rotten!* 55). He proceeds to describe the play: "a Prince...eating a Danish" who is visited by "the *phantom*! He's the former king who was murdered by the Prince's uncle...and the uncle's name is... *Scar*," and then the woman who the prince loves goes mad and "the prince says 'get thee to a nunnery!'" And then the nuns hide her and all of the singing children—from the Nazis" (*Something Rotten!* 67-68). Nostradamus' confusion means that Nick Bottom also does not understand the context of any of the lines that he borrows when he writes *Omelette*. Neither has actually seen any of the shows in which the lines originate. In his musical, Nick uses, for example, Shakespeare's line "something rotten" literally, to discuss rotting food, rather than metaphorically, as used by Shakespeare—and by the Kirkpatrick brothers, who wrote *Something Rotten!*, to name the Broadway show (94). Most significant, however, is the fact that Nick Bottom's Renaissance audience also does not understand any of his allusions; they have no idea who Nazis<sup>1</sup> or the Puerto Ricans are, both of which Nick references in *Omelette*. Nigel Bottom,

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<sup>1</sup> They mistakenly call the Nazis "good men one and all!" (*Something Rotten!* 95).

Nick's brother and the man who writes the *Omelette* script, actually leaves the troupe, saying, "The fact that you think Omelette is good... worries me" (*Something Rotten!* 86). In fact, the Renaissance audience understands the allusions even less than Nick does because they do not even know that the phrases and ideas come from the future. This allows Nick to repurpose the lines however he likes, but it also means that the allusions do no cultural work for him. The cultural capital that comes from these allusions does not exist in the Renaissance, where their sources do not yet exist.

The significance of cultural capital in the allusion's work is shown as Nostradamus attempts to convince Nick that writing a musical is not as ridiculous as it originally sounds to him but is instead a good idea. He must not only convince Nick, but also explain musicals to him, as Nick has only ever seen or heard of straight plays. Nostradamus does this in a roughly eight minute song, "A Musical," in which he references at least 20 different shows through music, staging, or lyrics. According to interactive graphic designer and data visualization journalist Joanna S. Kao, the song is 51% original material, 41% "classic show tunes," and 8% dance break. Nostradamus begins the song with references that Nick would understand, describing musicals as good alternatives—"more relaxing / and less taxing on the brain"—than "a play from Greek mythology / [where] a mother [has] sex with her son" (*Something Rotten!* 22). Nostradamus claims, "Nothing's as amazing as a musical," and describes them as "song and dance and sweet romance / And happy endings happening by happenstance / Bright lights, stage fights, and a dazzling chorus" (*Something Rotten!* 22). This description, however colorful and excited, is not enough to convince Nick. Nostradamus then proceeds to demonstrate "the best part" of musicals—"a dance break"—for Nick (*Something Rotten!* 22, 23). This seems to be what convinces the soothsayer that musicals have value, but it is still not enough to convince

Nick. Only after the soothsayer and his chorus have danced to and sung some of the most well-known melodies in the history of musicals, however, does Nick Bottom understand that “with a musical [he] might have half a chance” (*Something Rotten!* 26). It is this final allusion-filled verse, described in the musical’s book as “an homage to Broadway production numbers,” that causes Nick to join in enthusiastically with the chorus at the end of the song (*Something Rotten!* 24). These allusions are not only placed in front of Nick because they are successful and he wants to imitate them, but also because they represent the entire culture of Broadway musicals and therefore are able to prove to him that musicals have worth as an art form.

It is also interesting to consider which allusions the modern audience understands and enjoys, particularly in “A Musical.” Nick’s reaction is not specific to any one moment but rather the amalgamation, whereas modern views can often differentiate between allusions. The reactions, of course, depend on the audience, but regardless, some lines and choreography receive more audible approval from audiences than others. In the average viewing, there tends, for example, to be much cheering from the audience for a line repurposed from *Annie*, “It’s a musical—for us!” paired with floor scrubbing choreography (*Something Rotten!* 25). This most likely occurs because *Annie* has become quite mainstream with multiple film adaptations, including a recent 2014 movie, and is accessible for all ages. According to the Wall Street Journal article by Eben Shapiro, “That is the one [reference] that everyone gets.” The “Rockette’s style kick line” gets similar cheers, in complete compliance with the lyric:

And for some unexplainable reason

The crowd goes wild every time

When dancers kick in unison

In one big wonderful line” (*Something Rotten!* 26).

Other parts of the song, meanwhile, got more cheers in the Tony's Award Show screening, such as the joke about *Les Misérables* and the melody and staging from *Rent*. This difference may stem from the fact that the Tony's Award Show's audience would have had much more knowledge of musical theatre and possessed more related cultural capital than the average audience member would.

The Kirkpatrick brothers, the writers of the Broadway show *Something Rotten!*, use allusions more successfully than Nick does, primarily due to their audience's access to the relevant cultural capital. Nick uses allusions as a representative of shows that have not yet been produced, in order to learn about and gain the esteem that has been foretold about those shows. This may function as an education for Nick, but his allusions lack cultural capital because his audience neither belongs to nor knows about the culture in which the sources of the allusions reside. The allusions that the Kirkpatrick brothers make rely on the idea that the audience will understand them. Even if audience members do not know the origin of a line or chord, such as in "A Musical," they will be able to recognize that an allusion is being made. The Kirkpatrick brothers make clear that, through their use of allusions and even a little parody, they are building on a certain cultural history that they respect, even if they also have some critiques.

Through this use of cultural capital, the Kirkpatrick brothers demonstrate favorable similarities between *Something Rotten!* and other Broadway shows, raising their show to a more respected position within the intertextual matrix. The brothers accomplish three things that Nick fails to accomplish when they allude to other musicals. They honor the musicals that came before *Something Rotten!*, they elevate the status of musicals as a genre, and by virtue of this connection, they elevate *Something Rotten!* as well. The intention to honor is clear as, after all, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Even when Nostradamus mocks shows, like when he

calls *Les Misérables* miserable, the overall tone remains one of respect and awe. In fact, by compiling so many allusions to highly respected musicals, the song becomes a sort of greatest hits montage and, paired with the complimentary comments made through the show, *Something Rotten!* becomes an homage to musicals as a genre.

“If she’s copying us, then maybe the final stage is becoming us.” –The Doctor, *Doctor Who*

Unlike *Something Rotten!*, which uses allusion to place itself within an already well-established and respected genre, many works of children’s literature use allusions to elevate themselves beyond the restricted children’s genre. J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*, for example, alludes constantly to Classic Greek and Roman literature. Because this use of allusions employs references across genres, the allusions must be even more carefully chosen. While it is safe to assume that an audience viewing a musical has some sort of knowledge of other musicals, there is no reason to believe that someone reading a children’s fantasy novel will have a working knowledge of Classic Roman gods and mythology. The Venn diagram depicting this use of allusions is not necessarily two separate circles, but neither is it one circle. The choice to cross genres is very deliberate and brings the classic and epic elements into the children’s story.

Rowling’s allusions in *Harry Potter* include the names of characters like the werewolf Remus and the professor Minerva, the Latin derivatives of the magical spells, and many of the creatures encountered in the story. It helps the plot by placing the child protagonists in a world with heroes and metaphorical gods, using their cultural capital to elevate the simple magical school story that the *Harry Potter* series might be otherwise. The characters transform from mischievous and precocious children to heroes on epic quests.

Professor Minerva McGonagall in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, for example, carries the weight of the Roman goddess of wisdom in her name. Rowling bestows on the character a history of strength, power, authority, and intelligence, which is supported, of course, through McGonagall's characterization and actions throughout the novels. When meeting her, "Harry's first thought was that this was not someone to cross," and even as the series continues and she becomes a sort of mentor to Harry, this initial thought never stops ringing true (*Sorcerer's Stone* 113). Professor McGonagall is not just the Transfiguration teacher, but also the head of Gryffindor House—"where dwell the brave at heart / [with] their daring, nerve, and chivalry"—in addition to being the Headmaster's right hand (*Sorcerer's Stone* 118). Because of the Roman goddess allusion, the reader is also less surprised later when McGonagall proves herself as a warrior, surviving attacks that should have killed her (four stunning spells shot at her chest), and performs complicated magic on a constant basis.

It is interesting that Rowling chooses to name her character Minerva rather than Athena, the Greek name for the same goddess. One of the most significant differences between the two goddesses, other than their nationality, is that the Roman Minerva is considered a war goddess and Athena is not. Both women are warriors and important strategists in both battle and in managing the drama that constantly exists among the demigods and the Pantheon, but the connotations are different. This partially stems from how war was much more ingrained in Roman culture than Greek; every god and goddess is slightly more warlike in the Roman iteration. Regardless, Rowling's choice of the more war-like Roman goddess cashes in on cultural capital to provide a sort of foreshadowing for McGonagall's status later in the series. The Roman allusion also better fits her position as head of Gryffindor House instead of Ravenclaw House, the dwelling of "those of wit and learning," as one would expect from Athena



(*Sorcerer's Stone* 118). McGonagall does not simply play the role of professor and mentor, but she also physically and emotionally defends the school when the war arrives on its doorstep. The series does not end in a private showdown between the hero and the villain but in an actual final public battle at the school. As described in the book, *Harry Potter and the Classical World*, “the goddess [Minerva] was the Roman protectress of schoolchildren, as McGonagall is the protectress of students at Hogwarts” (Spencer 6). It is not surprising, then, that Minerva leads the teachers and students into battle and plays a large part in ensuring the survival of many characters.

Harry Potter may not have a Classic heroic name himself, but having a mentor in Minerva elevates him to the status of hero. As Spencer states, it is clear that “Minerva’s relationship to Harry Potter has parallels to Athena’s relationship with Odysseus, as his protector and helper. At Hogwarts, when Harry sometimes breaks the rules, she is stern and magisterial in her manner, but flexible and temperate in her punishments” (Spencer 99). This relationship in turn allows Harry to be compared to heroes and demigods. He can break the rules, not because of favoritism, but because he has impressed powerful people and because of the good that he does for his community.

Rowling also exposes her child-heroes to creatures and monsters that Classic heroes face, such as a three-headed dog, a basilisk, and the Sphynx. From the first book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, the eleven-year-old title character and his two best friends, Ron and Hermione, establish themselves as heroes in the epic sense. At the end of the book, they work together to pass a series of tests set by some of the smartest wizards alive in an attempt to keep out the most powerful wizard of the time. The first of these is a three-headed dog, “clearly a repackaging of Cerberus, the vicious three-headed dog that guards the underworld” (Spencer 6).

They take a page from the Classical Orpheus' handbook and play some music, calming the dog and getting past. Already at age ten the success of these children compares to that of Orpheus, iconic hero and the only human, other than Heracles/Hercules to enter the Underworld, deal with Cerberus, and survive.

They also work their way past Minerva's test, which is a giant murderous chess set. This moment serves especially to elevate Ron, Harry's best friend and a character who until this point seems significantly less heroic and intelligent than Harry and Hermione. Because he not only beats the pseudo-goddess of wisdom's test but also sacrifices himself so that his two companions can continue the "quest," he similarly rises to the position of hero. The fact that the three children not only survive the tests, but also pass them is especially impressive, considering they were set up to be better defenses than an already impenetrable top security bank vault.

McGonagall says, "no one can possibly steal [the stone they were defending], it's too well protected," yet somehow, Harry manages to do so (*Sorcerer's Stone* 268). Along with defeating Cerberus, this mimics the tasks set by the gods for Hercules/Heracles, which similarly should have been impossible. In Classic epics, the distinction between heroes, whether biologically demigods or simply favored by the gods, and simple soldiers was the ability to accomplish tasks set by the gods. By getting past all of the defenses, the child heroes in *Harry Potter* demonstrate that they are fit to stand among the heroes of Ancient Greece and Rome.

By including all of these allusions, Rowling not only elevates and legitimizes the characters, but the series itself as well. Although originally and primarily intended for an audience of children, the *Harry Potter* series has also been read by and is culturally significant to adults of all ages. After all, half of the eight movies based on the series are rated PG-13, which implies that they were created for an audience consisting of mainly teenagers and adults.

Rowling's use of cultural capital to elevate the *Harry Potter* series helps create the basis for this adult audience and even a new protagonist. Newt Scamander, the main character in the spin-off movie series, *Fantastic Beasts* (also PG-13), is an adult, which illustrates how cultural capital can bridge the divide between children's literature and adult cinematic entertainment. The *Harry Potter* series in general does get darker tonally and tackle more complex issues as it proceeds and the characters grow, but without elevating it from the beginning of the series, the adult audience may never have stayed with the books long enough to explore the more adult topics.

The children's movie *Zootopia* similarly uses allusion as cultural capital to rise above its genre when it imitates a scene from *The Godfather*. During the scene in question, the main characters of *Zootopia* find themselves at the office of a local mob boss on the day of his daughter's wedding, echoing the opening scene of *The Godfather*. The mob boss dresses and speaks like Don Vito Corleone, the mobster played by Marlon Brando. The scene is partially for the entertainment of the adults forced to sit through a children's movie (just like the movie's brief references to the adult television show, *Breaking Bad*), but the scene does much more than entertain. So-called "adult jokes" found in G and PG rated movies that go over the children's heads—such as the scene in *Inside Out* where the characters become "abstracted" by moving through the four stages "non-objective fragmentation," "deconstruction," "two dimensional," and "non-figurative" and any of many sneaky innuendos—would have suitably provided the entertainment function. Instead, by recreating a scene from what many people consider the greatest film of all time and what the American Film Institute ranks as the second "greatest American film of all time," just after *Citizen Kane*, the children's movie is elevated ("AFI's 100 Years..."). It reminds the viewer that *Zootopia* is not a regular children's movie, but one that is confronting complex issues. Both *Zootopia* and *The Godfather* contain surprising and almost

unprecedented—for the time and genre—psychological and cultural complexity. *The Godfather* portrayed mobsters as dynamic characters, with families, religion, and complex moral codes. *Zootopia* uses a talking bunny to tackle sexism and racism, which the character finds in the workforce and in her new home. The Oscar winning film is able to highlight complicated problems, without simplifying them for the younger audience in a way that diminishes them.

Using cross genre allusions in order to gain cultural capital is found not only in the genre of children's literature, but in other situations as well, where someone or some work would like to gain respect. The villainous character in Marvel's *Deadpool*, for example, constantly struggles to convince Deadpool to call him by his "villain name," which is Ajax, rather than Francis, his given name. Deadpool, however, does not allow Francis to elevate himself to the status of the acclaimed Greek hero Ajax and refuses to use the name. It is only because of allusions' function as cultural capital that moments like this, between Deadpool and Francis, function as more than just humor. By carrying the weight of the original hero, the argument becomes about *the* name, rather than a name. Through the self-awareness of Deadpool (the character and the film itself), this creates an interesting affect, both comparing and contrasting current superhero stories to the Classic hero epic.

*Something Rotten!* also uses this form of cultural capital in order to elevate the genre of musical closer to the status of a straight play in the hierarchy of respected stage show genres. Due to its setting during Shakespeare's lifetime and its inclusion of the Bard as a character, *Something Rotten!* contains a plethora of references to his works which work on a slightly different level than the musical allusions in the show. When referencing musicals, the Kirkpatrick brothers mock the genre a bit, but they are ultimately respectful. When referencing Shakespeare, they go further in the extremes. They write Shakespeare as a rock star, shouting

lines from his work into a crowd, such as the phrase, “Shall I compare thee,” and allowing his fawning audience to complete, “to a winter’s day” (*Something Rotten!* 40). This rearranges the hierarchy by lowering Shakespeare’s artistic merits in comparing them to popular music, which is often less respected than poetry. Additionally, there is a song in the show entitled “God, I hate Shakespeare” and multiple moments in the play where Shakespeare steals famous *Hamlet* lines from Nigel Bottom, their supposedly true author. This elevates Nigel as an artist and therefore elevates his work as well. By rearranging the hierarchy of culture to either elevate or lower the status of a work through cultural capital, these works become closer together within the matrix.

## CHAPTER TWO: Cultural Currency

“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.” –Nelson Mandela

The work that allusion accomplishes as cultural currency differs from its work as capital; while capital builds mostly static, hierarchical systems, currency is communication that works horizontally to build communities. It is traded between texts or between audience members, or both, in order to build bridges that bring works and people together. The difference is highlighted by the 2006 teen romantic comedy, *She's the Man*, which sets William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in a contemporary American boarding school and therefore is essentially one large Shakespeare allusion. While a work can use allusions as both currency and capital, *She's the Man* does not use Shakespeare to elevate the film and attempt to be anything more than a typical teen comedy. Renowned movie critic Roger Ebert in fact cited the comedic acting as one of strengths of the movie while finding the plot one of its weaknesses: “I didn't for one second believe the plot of “She's the Man.” Instead, the movie reminds audiences of the fact that Shakespeare's works were once actually considered popular culture and not just revered as literary genius accessible for the cultural and educational elite. *She's the Man* uses its allusions to bring Shakespeare back to the people. The universality of Shakespeare's themes and comedy are emphasized as they still apply in the new setting centuries later. Ebert does not rate the movie very highly, giving it three stars, but calls the movie likeable, “good-natured and silly” (Ebert). This mediocre rating is fitting, yet *She's the Man* has become a sort of teen classic. Several magazines and websites recently celebrated its tenth anniversary with articles and suggestions that their readers re-watch the movie. Instead of using Shakespeare's cultural capital to elevate

itself, *She's the Man* builds connections. *She's the Man* brings a new community of teens—the same people watching teen movies like *John Tucker Must Die* (which also came out that same year), but not necessarily British Renaissance plays—to Shakespeare's work and brings Shakespeare into the modern era.

When working as cultural currency instead of capital, allusions work to form bonds and bring both texts and audiences closer together. If an allusion is made incorrectly or a reference is not understood, an expectation falls short and a moment of kinship between the person using the allusion and his or her audience is lost. Conversely, understanding allusions can build connections that form communities. When the parties are all “in on the joke,” or the allusion, a bond forms. They also find themselves with something in common—an understanding and often enjoyment of a certain piece of media or literature. In the romantic comedy *Man Up*, for example, the main character sets the plot in motion by pretending to be a man's blind date because he quotes from her favorite movie when they meet.

When allusions are found in text, however, the connections that they build are not only between characters but also often between texts or between the text and the audience. In his article “*Casablanca*: Cult movies and intertextual collage,” Umberto Eco discusses what makes a movie a cult movie (hint: the answer is its use of allusions), and this discussion serves to explain why allusions can serve as important forms of communication. Eco describes cult movies as films that can be dismantled and utilized in pieces, in other texts or in everyday life. Two benefits found in creating these “living example[s] of living textuality” are that these pieces are often borrowed from past films in a form of capital and that they can also then form the foundation for future conversation. For most of the children watching *Zootopia*, for example, the scene with the mob boss will be their first introduction to *The Godfather*. This means that while

those children may associate the iconic accent with a computer generated shrew instead of a Corleone, they also will enter the *Godfather* franchise, whenever they see it, already understanding that the Godfather is neither all good nor all bad. The presence of the Godfather in a children's movie also functions to demonstrate how iconic and culturally important *The Godfather* is—so important that children should be exposed to it, albeit in a PG-rated way. The parents watching the film also can utilize this currency to bond with their children. By connecting the two texts, the allusion also connects the two communities of movie watchers, bringing them closer together in understanding the reference, even if they come at the allusion from different angles.

“Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.” –Rick Blaine, *Casablanca*

Lorelai from *Gilmore Girls* constantly uses allusions to form bonds throughout the series; although she uses them primarily to control her relationships with other characters, they also serve to form a community with the audience. She uses allusions as in-jokes, choosing them so that the right person understands them and the other people do not. In order to accomplish this, Lorelai is very specific with the references that she makes. Occasionally people surprise and disappoint her when they do not understand, but generally, if they are confused, it is due to a purposeful choice in allusions.

Often, when at dinner at her parents' house, Lorelai alludes to popular culture that her parents will not understand, but that her daughter, Rory, does, in order to emphasize the “teams” that she sees in her head: Lorelai and Rory vs Richard and Emily. She also does this when at dinner with Richard, Emily, and Rory's father, Chris. After her dad finishes describing his new car, Lorelai turns to Chris and says, “Excellent for cranking Metallica” (Sherman-Palladino “It



Should've Been Lorelai"). Richard, not realizing the Metallica is a band, says, "If that's some sort of drug reference, it isn't funny" (Sherman-Palladino "It Should've Been Lorelai"). In one single allusion, Lorelai manages to anger and embarrass her father, pushing him away, while forming a bond with Chris, who is privileged enough to be in on the joke. Whether the viewer actually knows the reference or not, it is clear that Richard has misunderstood and that the viewer is meant to appreciate the joke and be a part of Lorelai's team.

The problem here is clearly that in order for this bonding to work, both parties must understand the allusion, which at times may not be the case. The solution to this problem is education. To this end, recommending a movie, book, or album to someone is a sign of attempting to build a relationship with that person. Only characters that Lorelai really cares about are invited to educational movie nights. Instead of giving up on Luke, her best friend and future husband, when she discovers that he has not seen *Casablanca*, she says, "My house. 8 o'clock. We have such work to do" (Sherman-Palladino "The Fundamental Things Apply"). By educating him, she brings him into the fold. Similarly, when she invites her daughter's boyfriend, Dean, to movie night for the first time, it signifies her approval of him. He only understands a small fraction of her references before he attends movie night, but after joining them, he is able to quickly pick up her pop cultural language. Educating the men builds bonds that go even beyond simply choosing references that she knows that they will understand, because she is giving them more currency and strengthening their communication for the future.

Viewers of the show can also feel either alienated or a part of the Gilmore community based on their understanding of the references. Interestingly, when the show first aired, most of the references were current enough that the average viewer understood Lorelai and the others fairly well. Now the show is on Netflix and creating a new generation of viewers who only

understand a fraction of the allusions. Rather than simply accepting this, younger viewers are combating their lack of older popular culture knowledge and attempting to bring themselves into the Gilmore inner circle. To this end, there are several websites and articles dedicated to cataloging and explaining the references in *Gilmore Girls*. There is even a “Rory Gilmore Reading Challenge” where viewers attempt to read every single book that Rory is seen with throughout the series, in order to keep up with her literary references in addition to the popular culture allusions.

In the movie *Deadpool*, Wade Wilson, or Deadpool himself, uses allusions as currency in order to build relationships more directly with his audience than *Gilmore Girls* does, specifically through fourth wall breaks. The allusions begin immediately in the opening credits scene which shows a *People* magazine displaying Ryan Reynolds, the actor who plays Wade, on the cover and a *Green Lantern* trading card, also stamped with Reynolds’ face from his role in a different superhero film. In those first couple minutes, the movie quickly establishes that it will acknowledge the world outside the movie and that it is not afraid to mock itself in the way that the audience members would. The trend continues as Wade’s narration starts and he explicitly refers to other Reynolds or X-men movies. Examples include when Wade says that Deadpool’s situation could be worse and flashes to the fan-detested *X-men Origins: Wolverine* version of Deadpool with eye scars and a mouth sewn shut, when he visits Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters and notes, “It’s a big house. It’s funny that I only ever see the two of you [here]. It’s almost like the studio couldn’t afford another X-man,” and when he questions which professor is in residence, asking “McAvoy or Stewart? These timelines get so confusing” (*Deadpool*). These comments are carefully calculated to do several things, in addition to making the viewers laugh. They all take the audience out of the movie’s story for a moment, remind the viewers that Wade

is also aware of the real life context in which the movie is made, and express a criticism that the viewers are likely to have had themselves. This allows *Deadpool* to bring the audience members into the conversation, even as it pushes them out of the movie and plot.

While alluding to life outside the movie in order to connect the character to the audience, *Deadpool* also uses them to connect you—yeah, you—to other films. The most clear and reoccurring connection is between *Deadpool* and the other movies and comics in the Marvel X-men universe. There is, however, also an homage to *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* at the end of the movie, acknowledging and honoring Bueller, another famous breaker of the fourth wall. In the end credit scene of *Deadpool*, Wade Wilson comes out wearing his Deadpool costume with the iconic *Ferris Bueller* bathrobe over it and gives a monologue that parodies Bueller's final monologue. He begins with a direct quote of Bueller's: "You're still here? It's over. Go home" (*Ferris Bueller's Day Off*). After, though, Deadpool adds a Marvel twist, saying, "Oh, you're expecting a teaser for *Deadpool 2*...Oh, I can tell you one thing that's a bit of a secret. [In] the sequel, we're gonna have Cable" (*Deadpool*). This part points the audience back to the Marvel franchise by referencing and mocking the audience expectations for the traditional teaser at the end of Marvel movies. Again, Wade connects to the audience by directly addressing their thoughts about the movie and any connections that they may have made.

"Whatever happened to chivalry? ... I want John Cusack holding a boom box outside my window. I wanna ride off on a lawnmower with Patrick Dempsey. I want Jake from *Sixteen Candles* waiting outside the church for me. I want Judd Nelson thrusting his fist into the air because he knows he got me." —Olive Pendergast, *Easy A*

Adapting previous works into different contexts and time periods is another way of using

allusions as currency to build the intertextual matrix between works. Contemporary adaptations of older texts are essentially each one large reference that creates a connection between two (or more) different time periods. Specifically translating characters and stories into the modern day of the new author allows the new text to do more allusion work than a film that simply retells a Regency England romance plot in a new medium. The characters and plot elements become currency that is traded between the original and updated works, connecting the two time periods and introducing audiences to a timeless story that may have been less accessible to them in its original format and setting. The scenes described in *Easy A*, for example, update the ideals of feudal chivalry to fit the 1980s. Women may no longer be in need of rescue by a knight in shining armor, but as the sentiment of desiring a metaphorical knight who cares about her remains, the allusion survives with a little modern twist.

This discussion differs from adaptation theory, which concerns how and why adaptations honor and satirize the original work. Adaptation theory examines the texts as a modern audience looking at an old work in terms of “fidelity aesthetics,” “the importance of pleasure,” and “why people choose to remediate particular texts at different times” (Clayton). In contrast, this discussion focuses on the connection created between the original and current communities, and what the work says about and means to the new contemporary culture. When adaptations function as cultural currency, the focus is on their position and conversation within contemporary popular culture—how the old story fits into its new contemporary setting. In this method of examining adaptations, the changes made do not serve to point out flaws with the original, but to better connect with the contemporary audience.

Updating classic texts in this way creates a parallelism that reveals a lot about the universality of certain human experiences and about the new culture and community in which the

texts are now placed. When the story and character of a young single woman in Regency England, for example, is altered in order to fit a graduate student or a working woman in contemporary society, the changes that must be made are as revealing as the ideas that stay the same. These changes not only reveal truths about contemporary society but also serve to bring the story into the realm of the audience member's lives in order to be in conversation with them and their society. The story now has more value as currency in the society because it uses their language. Jane Austen is an author whose works are constantly being rewritten or expanded. The 1995 film *Clueless*, the 2001 film *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the 2012-2013 web series *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, and the 2004 film *Bride & Prejudice* are only a few examples of Austen's works translated into contemporary settings and media<sup>2</sup>. Each one takes place in its own unique setting and community. Together they also display five distinct styles of comedy, each directed by its cultural setting even though all are inspired by the same source, Austen's own sense of humor.

By changing aspects of Austen's characters so that they fit into their contemporary settings, they not only become more clearly allusions, rather than repetitions of her work, but they also become more relatable to the audiences and are placed within the audiences own community, using their language to communicate and form relationships. This is in contrast to some of the Jane Austen film adaptations that are period pieces, like the 2015 Kiera Knightly *Pride & Prejudice* and the 1996 Gwyneth Paltrow *Emma*. The updated films instead put the classic characters into the audience's contemporary landscape—a California high school in *Clueless*, a British suburb in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, a graduate student's internet community in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, and a wedding season in Amritsar, India in *Bride & Prejudice*—so that they become more accessible. This allows the adored Austen stories to be revived and given

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<sup>2</sup> *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is another interesting adaptation of Austen's work, but as it translates Austen into a different genre, rather than a different time, it will not be discussed here.

new life. According to Dianne Sadoff, “protectors of [Austen’s] canon worry equally about the public’s ignorance of literary, artistic, or architectural culture and, paradoxically, its commodification and defacement by overly easy access,” but both of these problems are in a sense solved with the modern adaptations (3). By translating the script, the new films lead audiences back to and educate them about Austen, without actually touching and potentially messing up Austen’s specific story and culture.

In her book *Victorian Vogue: British Novels on Screen*, Dianne Sadoff states that Jane Austen is considered vital “Heritage” for England and argues that the film adaptations of her works generally make a point about or a critique of Austen’s time while also saying something about the time in which the movie was made. She says this specifically about the films and serials that attempt to retain the true culture of the original novels. She argues, for example, that one “BBC classic serial” was “used to arouse and allay interwar fears about post-Depression penury and worries about a newly declared war in Europe” and that a different serial used a critique of Austen’s supposed conservatism in order to “expose heritage film’s present uses of political and historical past” (Sadoff 3).

Similar to the way that these adaptations use Austen to say something about the contemporary time of the film, so do the modern adaptations, only a bit more clearly, due to the updated setting. Each takes on an aspect of one of Austen’s main themes—stability/status anxiety—modernizes it, and soothes the audience, telling it, as Austen did, that all would be okay. *Clueless* assures its original audience that the trend of vapid elitism does not mean the end of education and philanthropy. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* assures millennials that they can succeed in the job market, in a time when getting jobs out of college and graduate school is quite difficult. *Bridget Jones’s Diary* assures audiences that they are not stuck in the life that they

originally, and perhaps poorly, chose for themselves. Finally, *Bride & Prejudice* assures them that a balance can be sought between older, traditional customs and modern ideals.

The setting and comedy lead to substantial changes in the story, allowing the new works to trade with the currency of that society. *Bride & Prejudice*, in turn, takes from the Bollywood genre and has colorful and dramatic musical numbers. Songs like “No Life without Wife” integrate traditional Indian culture, which has values that parallel those in Austen’s culture, with contemporary Western culture. It does this by both emphasizing the importance of marriage and also mitigating it by emphasizing the desire for a relationship with love and equality, in a fun and silly way. The song expresses feelings that Elizabeth Bennet may have had, such as “I don’t want a man who’s crude and loud / wants a pretty wife to make him proud...I just want a man good and smart / A really sharp mind and a very big heart,” but expresses them through sisters who are singing and dancing in their pajamas, which is very Bollywood (*Bride & Prejudice*). They also speak much more openly than Austen’s Bennets would have about potential suitors: “Maybe he’s good in bed” (*Bride & Prejudice*). This kind of closeness and gossip is commonplace in the new society.

Altering the heroine’s age is one of the biggest changes made in her characterization in each of these adaptations. Translating the age of Austen heroines is difficult but necessary in order to put the heroines in conversation with the viewers’ life experiences, because the responsibilities of a 20-year-old single woman in Austen’s time (which is the age of most of her main characters) do not match the responsibilities of the average modern 20-year-old woman. The stories have more currency when they allude to both Austen and to the contemporary society in which they are now placed. This can be partially accomplished simply by successfully

translating the story into its new culture, so that it is as seamless as if Austen had originally written the story in that setting and context.

In *Clueless*, the updated busybody Emma character, Cher, is translated into high school, with independence and big plans, yet not actually a lot of power. Cher has a credit card, but no driver's license. *Clueless* is the only adaptation discussed here that translates Austen's *Emma* and the only one where the character was made younger. If she was too much older, the privileged and single-minded Cher probably would have gained for herself the power that Austen's Emma lacks due to her time period. In this version, however, Cher now has the currency to form bonds and communities with high school students that may have struggled to connect with Emma, whether due to the language of the novel, an inability to relate to the social customs of the time, or some other reason. Cher can learn the same lessons as Emma, to be more compassionate and that one cannot simply play with the feelings of other people without consequences, but she does so with the lingo of the 90s. Social classes are converted into the popularity scale of high school cliques, while modesty and subtle insults take the backseat as seen by comments like "I was surfing the crimson wave. I had to haul ass to the ladies'" and "She's a full on Monet...From far away, it's okay, but up close, it's a big old mess" (*Clueless*).

In contrast, Lizzie and Bridget, from their respective self-titled diaries, are both reimagining *Pride and Prejudice*'s Elizabeth Bennet as working women. Lizzie is a mass communications graduate student who works several internships throughout the course of the series while Bridget works at a book publishing agency at the beginning of the film and then becomes a journalist. Both of these women are therefore older than Austen's 20-year-old Elizabeth. The new focus on career, which they have but Elizabeth lacks, creates a large shift in the story, especially considering both of their romantic relationships are intimately tied to their



work. In *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, Lizzie takes an internship at Pemberley Digital while unaware that it is Darcy's company. It is while working there that she finally develops a positive relationship with him. He later offers her a permanent job at the company, which she turns down, saying "I don't want to be the girl who dates the boss" (Su Episode 99). Bridget Jones, meanwhile, takes her comedy from the fact that she *is* the girl who dates the boss. She knows that it is a bad decision, and she ends up quitting her job due to the failure of that relationship, but this twist reminds us that as intelligent as Elizabeth is usually portrayed, she makes some poor judgements in the original work as well. They simply have more minimal consequences because, in general, the choices that she could make with the options and power that she is offered are minimal as well.

Since *Pride and Prejudice* focuses on the society's preoccupation with marriage, it follows that the heroines in the new stories have been made older since contemporary women marry later than women in Austen's time did. It would have been absurd to have a 21<sup>st</sup> century upper class American woman in high school feeling like marriage is an immediate priority and would have hurt that connection between the character and the audience. Lalita, *Bride & Prejudice*'s Elizabeth, has a less distinct age, but even she is probably slightly older than the original.

The heroine's views on marriage are also altered in the contemporary versions in order to match society's changing values and be placed in conversation with the thoughts and feelings of the people watching the movies. Cher is, of course, only really insistent on fixing up her friends for fun. For the majority of the movie, she believes that there is no point in dating a high school boy. She has little to no interest in arranging permanent security through marriage in the way that Austen's Emma does. Cher and her friends focus instead on being "educated" (to them, this often

has more to do with social smarts than school smarts) and providing their own security for themselves. Although there is a wedding scene at the end of the movie, which is not Cher's wedding, and she catches the bouquet, she scoffs—"As if!"—at the idea of being married any time soon (*Clueless*).

The *Pride and Prejudice* ladies, of course are more concerned with marriage—except in the most modern version. In the web series, although the Bennet mother is still obsessed with marriage, Lizzie has "other things to worry about" such as her degree and student loans (Su Episode 1). Mr. Collins' marriage proposal is translated by the web series into a job offer that Lizzie rejects and Charlotte takes. While Lizzie decides to move to San Francisco, where Darcy works, so that they do not have a long distance relationship, they do not actually move in together. No one ends the series engaged or married. Lizzie also cites her career as a reason for the life change, so even then, the focus is not entirely on the romantic relationship: "If I'm going to be starting my own company, San Francisco might be the place to do it. Optimal, even" (Su Episode 99).

Bridget is more desperate in comparison, mostly because she has been single for so long that she feels that dying alone is inevitable if she does not actively and quickly procure the perfect relationship. Unlike most of the *Pride and Prejudice* adaptations in which the Elizabeth character finds out that having a relationship with the Wickham character is a bad idea after already starting the relationship, Bridget is fully aware of the poor decision that she is making. Before he is even introduced, Bridget declares that he falls into all of the following categories: "Alcoholics, workaholics, commitment-phobics, peeping toms, megalomaniacs, [], or perverts" (*Bridget Jones's Diary*). She of course dates him anyway before leaving him for Darcy. Despite her desperation, however, Bridget also does not end the film married or engaged.

Lalita's position on marriage is actually the most like Austen's Elizabeth out of the four. Lalita and her sister actually have a double wedding at the end of *Bride & Prejudice*. She does not seem desperate to marry, but as the movie takes place in India and focuses on the culture of arranged marriage, she seems to understand and accept the inevitable. One of the biggest arguments that Lalita and Darcy have in this adaptation is actually about marriage. Darcy is American, not Indian, and does not understand why arranged marriages still take place, yet Lalita realizes that Darcy's mother is controlling and attempting to arrange Darcy's marriage as well. Throughout the course of the movie, they discuss and finally concede (before their own marriage to each other) that there are both benefits and consequences to arranged marriages, which is how many contemporary Indians feel. There is, after all, a reason why the practice still exists, even within some Indian families in the United States. The way that Lalita and Darcy settle their argument just because they are in love mimics the way that Elizabeth and Darcy's disagreements seem to just disappear in the novel. *Bride & Prejudice* points out to the modern audience, however, that this is not necessarily settling, but realizing that the happiness in their marriage is more important than arguing over differing opinions about the courting process.

One of the great things about modernizing the text is that the characters can enter the dialogue about Austen's works themselves. Lizzie dissects Austen's opening line in her first episode, although she knows the quote from a t-shirt that her matchmaking mother has made her. According to her, the line does not stand the test of time: "Universal truth? Really? I'm sure there are a great number of rich, young, single men who aren't looking for wives" (Su Episode 1). Lizzie criticizes the quote, also noting that "rich, young, and single" are not the only three necessary qualifiers for a good man. Some men who fit into that category could be sleazy, creepy, focused on work instead of dating, still pining after previous significant others, or simply

gay. In Austen's world, perhaps some of these were not a reason not to marry, but in Lizzie's world, they definitely are.

Lizzie also jokingly addresses a common criticism of *Pride and Prejudice*, which is that Elizabeth fell in love with Darcy's property and wealth rather than Darcy himself. When Darcy asks her when she changed her mind about him, she says, "Oh, I think the moment I saw the offices at Pemberley Digital. You should know, those napping pods? Women swoon!" and emphasizes how ridiculous that theory seems in the modern context (Su Episode 99). Lizzie dismisses that claim quickly, especially since Darcy does not really appreciate the joke, and acknowledges that she fell in love with him the same way that he fell in love with her: "gradually" (Su Episode 99).

Due to the changes made when modernizing the works, the new movies are not repetitions of Austen's works but new creatures in and of themselves, earning themselves distinct spots in the intertextual matrix, rather than being clustered in the Jane Austen corner with all of the period pieces. Even though these works all stem from Austen's original text, they are different enough to be placed in slightly different genres: teen comedy, romantic comedy, and Bollywood romance, respectively. They do, however, lead audiences closer to Austen, and even to each other. The title of the web series, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, is after all, strikingly similar and likely an allusion to *Bridget Jones's Diary*. This is not a coincidence, as it all goes back to Austen and the way that she originally intimately portrayed women's lives.

"The number one question I get asked—because the fandom is real—is...to sort the [American] Founders into Hogwarts houses." —Lin Manuel Miranda

Fan culture is evidence of allusions' work as currency. Allusions and fan culture together

sell merchandise, fill convention centers, and build real life communities out of fictional works. As Stephen Sansweet, the retired Director of Content Management and head of Fan Relations at Lucasfilm, Ltd., says, “Fandom may start with the [intellectual] property, but it ends up being all about the people” (4). It goes far beyond the bonds previously mentioned, in which the text talks at the audience in the audience’s language and mutual understanding ensues. In fan culture, a dialogue is formed. The audience talks back to the text and to each other. Sometimes, the text even follows with a response.

Allusions’ role as currency is directly evidenced in fanfiction, or stories written by fans of a work that are usually based or building on that work, and the communities that build around it. By writing or reading fanfiction, audiences get to participate and contribute to the growth of the original text, even if indirectly. As author Rainbow Rowell says in her novel about fanfiction, “the story doesn’t have to end when [the author] gets tired of it” (123). Fanfictions can update and continue the work, even as the source material ends and remains stagnant, in order to keep up with the community around it.

The principal character in Rainbow Rowell’s novel *Fangirl* certainly uses fanfiction in this way, in addition to using it to create a community around herself. The novel is about lonely and introverted Cather, a college freshman who writes fanfiction. She writes what is one of the most popular fanfictions, “Carry On,” for Rowell’s version of *Harry Potter*, “Simon Snow.” The novel follows Cath as she makes herself a community at the college, but also emphasizes the community that she has within the Simon Snow fandom. On nights when she stays home alone in her dorm, she works on her story and reads and responds to comments from other fans. Even though it takes most of the novel for Cather to build healthy and sustainable college relationships, it is her Simon Snow community that sustains her until then. This community

understands her, is disappointed when she is “missing”—usually in the form of a lack of a story update—and in Cath’s words, “has all the benefits of ‘other people’ without the body odor and the eye contact” (Rowell 147). As she tells her roommate, although the community has not met in person, the bonds are still real. Occasionally, the fanfiction community does actually bleed into her college life, such as when she runs into a girl on campus wearing a “Carry On” shirt. Sometimes the fanfiction even helps facilitate the creation of her college community. When she is nervous around her crush, for example, they talk about her Simon Snow stories (proof that her feelings are not one-sided). When she and her sister begin speaking again, after an argument early in the novel, they bond through editing and planning “Carry On.” Even writing the story is a communal process on some levels, because of the input that “betas” (fanfiction editors) and commenters may have on the story.

Fanfiction in some instances is not incredibly different from modern day adaptations, in that they can simply be a rewriting of a story in a new context. With fanfiction, however, texts are not only updated, but twisted to fit whatever new scenarios or worlds the new writer would like. Don Tresca’s essay, “Spellbound: An Analysis of Adult-Oriented Harry Potter Fanfiction,” although specifically about sex in *Harry Potter* fanfiction, details how the writers of the works are often using the “scaffolding” of the source text in order to work through thoughts and feelings about the actual world in which they live (44). Sometimes this means placing the fanfiction in the author’s real world, but sometimes it means placing it in another fictional world that means something to the writer. There is a theory online that for every source text that has inspired fanfiction, there exists a *Harry Potter* alternate universe fanfiction story for that source text. These crossover stories demonstrate the coming together of two communities, *Harry Potter* and whatever other assorted work, by trading the currency of allusions in order to blend the two

stories. This may be accomplished, for example, by placing Elizabeth Bennet and William Darcy in Hogwarts together and having their original disdain for each other stem from “blood status” or school houses, rather than wealth and social status, using *Harry Potter*’s language to tell Austen’s story<sup>3</sup>. As Joss Whedon said, “There’s a time and place for everything, and I believe it’s called ‘fan fiction.’”

Occasionally, the source text becomes actively involved in the community itself, responding in the “canon” (original source material) works to the fans. One of the running themes in the book *Fan CULTure: Essays on Participatory Fandom in the 21st Century* is that the fans not only use the currency, but create their own and sometimes even become involved in the creation of new “canon” texts. This can be simple and literal, such as when fans become involved in the creation of the text. This occurred, for example, when Peter Capaldi was cast as the most recent iteration of the Doctor on *Doctor Who*. The man had been a fan of the show since he was young and now plays the iconic character, directly responding to the fan community in his actions in the show itself, as he is a member (Capaldi). Similar situations have occurred when directors or writers have been hired to continue a franchise of which they were personally fans. Additionally, sometimes the continuation itself is a direct response to fans, such as when the cancelled *Firefly* television show made a movie to cap off the series (Barton).

In other instances, the writers add in moments in the text as a direct response to fans. *Supernatural* is well known for doing this, as the writers “openly acknowledge the work of their fans” and have written several episodes where “fandom” is a plot or subplot (Graham). The BBC show *Sherlock* also acknowledges its fans in the first episode of season 3, in which one of the characters plays the part of the fandom and comes up with crazy theories as to how Sherlock

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<sup>3</sup> Such crossovers certainly exist, although their written skill and popularity may vary.

survived the season 2 finale, similar to the hypotheses that the fans were suggesting online. In one of the theories, Sherlock pretended to die because he was in a relationship with Moriarty, which is clearly a response to fans because the concept of their romantic relationship makes no sense within the context of the show, yet is often discussed among fans and in fanfiction.

By responding to fans, the source text pulls them into the intertextual matrix along with the canon texts. Their feelings and contributions become legitimate, and they become participants rather than simply passive viewers who use the text. It is the same reason most *Harry Potter* fans know into which Hogwarts house they would hypothetically be sorted (#puffpride). By using allusions in daily life, fans bring the text into real life and make themselves a part of it. Communities are then built around this shared experience and language, by trading allusions as currency. When the text itself becomes a part of the dialogue, the ultimate connection is formed, bringing everyone closer together.



## CONCLUSION

“Does the Defense’s case hold water?” –Vinny, *My Cousin Vinny*

It’s Sunday and the library is closed. It is not, however, dark and empty. (A library is never empty.) There is a meeting taking place at the Fiction Helpdesk.

The grey-eyed goddess calls the group therapy session to order. “Hello and welcome to Allusions Anonymous. I recognize some familiar characters and some new ones. It’s good to see you. I’d like to remind everyone that there are no judgements or hierarchies here. We are all here to deal with the pressures from the work we do building connections, whether they be minimal and behind the scenes or not. With that said, who would like to begin introductions?”

Many of the characters are human, but technically none of them are. They’ve journeyed more than most people, but they are just characters, residents of their particular works and visitors of the many minds that they encounter. The ones from television and film have been rendered in crisp HD (or foggy Technicolor); those from comics and graphic novels appear in the faded ink that results from copious page turnings; and those from novels look like a color theory modern art piece, made up of words in just the right hue and size to build a face. A few flicker between forms.

“Now that we have been introduced, who would like to speak first?”

A hand rises from the section where the many “Chosen Ones” sit. The lightning bolt scar flashes as the boy nervously pushes back his hair and speaks, “I know it’s an honor that people are still talking about me, I do. But I’m really struggling with it because I’m just exhausted. Even my author won’t let me go.”

“I feel you, kid,” responds a young lady, continually shifting between forms. “I love

seeing all of the new cultures and time periods, but some of these Darcys are duds. I just want to settle down. At least you have copyright on your side, though. I have no protection.”

“I mean, I’m running around in fanfics all over the place, so not so much,” he disputed.

She scoffs. “You think I don’t have fanfics? I’ve been to your school and—”

A voice interrupts, “I don’t understand why it bothers you when people talk about you. I love that I’m a model both for good friendship and the proper murder of evil witches.” The girl’s shoes flash from silver to red.

“The course of true fame never did run smooth,” a new speaker begins, projecting his voice theatrically. Characters grumble as he continues, knowing his reputation to speak in monologues. “Serving as a vehicle for capital and communication can be difficult, but be not afraid of greatness. You are made of sterner stuff. As you said in the beginning, it is an honor you dreamed not of. Personally, I love the name honor more than I fear death!”

A young girl next to him rolls her eyes. “That’s easy for you to say. You didn’t actually do anything, you’re just a characterization of the Bard. There’s literally no reason for you to fear your death. Meanwhile, I’m romanticized all the time because of mine. It’s so stupid. I really don’t understand how fake dying and then actually committing suicide are romantic activities.”

“Yes, this is true. I had not intended—”

“You are not actually my author! That’s not how it works. That’s not how any of this works! You’re a character!”

“Excuse you! I made you—”

The goddess’ owl hoots loudly and draws everyone’s attention. “Alright! I think that’s it for tonight. The Doctor has kindly brought snacks, so help yourself. They’re...fish fingers and custard, so if someone else could volunteer for next week, that would be great.”

A man in red spandex, face covered in scars, speaks up. “I’d volunteer to bring chimichangas, but since this is a one-shot for some nerd’s English thesis and we’re never meeting again, there’s no point.” He winks. “And we all lived happily ever after.”

Chicka chick ahh.

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